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Book Review: Beyond the Palin

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Beyond the Palin

John Heilemann & Mark Halperin,
*Game Change: Obama and the Clintons,
 McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime*
 (Harper, 2010).

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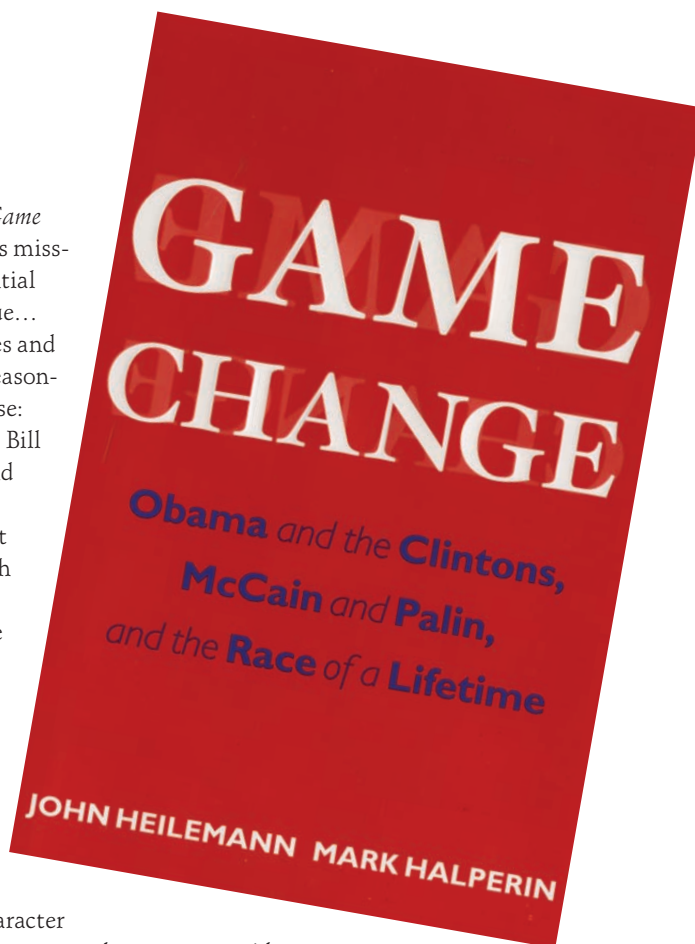
Heilemann and Halperin tell readers of *Game Change* right at the outset that “what was missing [in the reporting of the 2008 presidential campaign] and might be of enduring value... was an intimate portrait of the candidates and spouses who (in our judgment) stood a reasonable chance of occupying the White House: Barack and Michelle Obama, Hillary and Bill Clinton, John and Elizabeth Edwards, and John and Cindy McCain.” The authors’ method, they then tell us, was to conduct “more than three hundred interviews with more than two hundred people... on a ‘deep background’ basis, which means we agreed not to identify the subjects as sources in any way.” This sounds perilously close to Alice Longworth Roosevelt territory: “If you can’t say anything nice about someone, sit right here by me.” To be fair, Heilemann and Halperin, both experienced political reporters for *New York* and *Time* magazines respectively, aren’t interested in character assassination; their fascination seems more attuned to watching candidates commit political suicide.

Game Change, in large measure, focuses on and studies political marriages. Exhibit #1, of course, is Bill and Hillary Clinton whose marital ups and downs have been on public view since the early 1990s. The ex-president figured prominently in Hillary’s decision to run for president: “the other thing was Bill,” the authors write, “—more specifically his personal life, about which rumors were running rampant.... One party elder described the situation thus: ‘It’s like some Japanese epic film where everyone sees the disaster coming in the third reel but no one can figure out what to do about it.’” Leading Democrats like Harry Reid feared that should Hillary achieve the nomination, Republicans in the general election campaign would flood the media with stories of Bill’s past indiscretions and present philandering. No doubt they would have done; nevertheless, the

ex-president possessed unerring political instincts, could galvanize a crowd, and was invaluable as a fund raiser. Still, ambivalence about the ex-president persisted. Claire McCaskill, running for the Senate seat in Missouri left vacant by her husband’s death, when asked by Tim Russert during a “Meet the Press” interview whether she thought Bill Clinton had been a great president, remarked “I think he’s been a great leader, but I don’t want my daughter near him.” Hillary, who the next day was scheduled to appear at a New York fund raiser for McCaskill, cancelled. The Bill problem never disappeared and plagued Hillary’s primary campaign.

Be Patient: the Palin stuff is coming up.

The Clinton marriage, perplexing as it is, raises the question of the relation between a politician’s public



and private lives. To what extent do personal and private failings affect the performance of one's public duties? At what point does a private indiscretion become a betrayal of the public trust? On this issue it's the American public that's ambivalent. One part of us takes vicarious pleasure in the escapades of political scoundrels; another part wants those who serve us to be squeaky clean. The public forces public figures to operate in a climate that breeds hypocrisy as politicians craft an image that pushes into "deep background" anything that might tarnish their reputations. Yet, despite herculean efforts, including impeachment, to discredit his reputation as president, no one to my knowledge ever proved Bill Clinton betrayed or violated his public vows. His marital vows, yes, but his public vows? The jury for the ex-president is still and will probably always be hung.

Not so with John and Elizabeth Edwards. Here truly was a dung hill covered over with snow. Heilemann and Halperin note that Edwards' "experience during the general election [as John Kerry's running mate in 2004] seemed to [swell his head] to the point of bursting. He reveled in being inside the bubble: the Secret Service, the chartered jet, the press pack following him around, the swarm of factotums catering to his every whim." Edwards' egotism was matched by his wife Elizabeth's paranoia. Diagnosed with cancer days before the 2004 election, Elizabeth elicited great sympathy from the public. The Edwards' staff saw a different side. "The nearly universal assessment among them was that there was no one on the national stage for whom the disparity between public image and private reality was vaster or more disturbing." She was abusive to and dismissive of her husband, calling him a "hick" and his family "rednecks." She was, in a word, a virago, a Xanthippe to her husband's attempt to be a populist Socrates.

Enter Rielle Hunter. Heilemann and Halperin provide all the juicy details which were reported first in the *National Enquirer* though no one, except possibly Edwards himself, took the exposé seriously. Edwards met Hunter in early 2006 and not long after hired her to provide video and web documentary for his campaign. Edwards' staff knew perfectly well what was going on and, to be fair to them, tried to steer Edwards clear; he wouldn't listen. Aware that a damaging *Enquirer* story's appearance was imminent first Edwards, then his wife, had friends pressure *Enquirer* publisher David Pecker—you can't make this stuff up—to pull the exposé of Edwards' affair with Hunter. He wouldn't, it appeared, and received almost no notice in the mainstream media. Edwards' staff "efforts at containing the fallout were remarkably successful."

Only a couple more paragraphs until Palin.

Edwards campaigned on, but worse was yet to come. Two months later in December 2007 the *Enquirer* ran a second story headlined "UPDATE: JOHN EDWARDS LOVE CHILD SCANDAL." Hunter had been telling people that she was pregnant with Edwards' child. Enter Andrew Young, an Edwards gofer, who claimed paternity of the child even though he had talked openly about having had a vasectomy. Hunter delivered a baby girl in February. The following July, the *Enquirer*, which Heilemann and Halperin call Edwards' "personal tormentor and truth squad," published a grainy photo of Edwards holding the infant. Elizabeth Edwards went into denial, refusing to believe her husband was the father. "I have to believe [he's not]," Elizabeth said. "Because if I don't, it means I'm married to a monster."

One needs to digress here to note that the story lives on. The *Enquirer* has had its reporting accepted by the Pulitzer committee. And Andrew Young has published his own account of the imbroglio. *The Politician: An Insider's Account of John Edwards' Pursuit of the Presidency and the Scandal That Brought Him Down* sits in second place on the March 2nd *New York Times*' bestseller list right behind *Game Change*. In the book, listed as non-fiction, Young reveals the existence of a sex tape showing Edwards performing on-camera sex acts, the camera presumably held by Rielle. This, I guess, sort of out-Clintoned Clinton and Monica Lewinsky's infamous blue dress, and got Young and his wife the obligatory Oprah interview. By the time this is in print, the tape will probably be on You Tube.

And now for Sarah Palin, the Republican Party booby trap!

Sarah Palin at the outset was the longest of long-shots for John McCain's vice-presidential choice. The Senator had wanted to offer Joseph Lieberman the opportunity as the first person to represent both parties as a vice-presidential candidate. Even Lieberman realized the folly of that idea. Other, more conventional choices existed, but McCain, feeling he needed a game-changing choice, finally agreed to ask Palin to become his running mate even though he had met her only once and that briefly at a previous national governor's conference. By now it's well known that the McCain staff lacked sufficient time to vet her thoroughly. Initially, however, Palin impressed McCain and his staff with her composure, self-confidence and calm. When one advisor queried her lack of nervousness at being pulled out of virtual obscurity, she simply said "It's God's plan."

Maybe God placed the *National Enquirer* among us as part of His plan to punish a stiff-necked people and morally challenged politicians—as if eight years of George Bush hadn't been punishment enough—because

almost immediately the *Enquirer* had begun to question whether the infant Trig, Palin's Down Syndrome son, was in fact her child or her daughter Bristol's. The Palins had to announce that Bristol was five-months pregnant and, therefore, couldn't be Trig's mother. At which point the *Enquirer* reported "that Palin had had an affair." The McCain staffers found themselves working overtime just to stamp out fires and learn the truth whose only source all too often was Palin herself. "Dammit, I'm mad," Palin fumed, admonishing her staffers to put the story to rest. To no avail: the Trig and Bristol maternity sagas persisted in the blogosphere; the truth remained murky. "I find the account of her pregnancy and labor provided by Palin to be perplexing, to put it mildly," Andrew Sullivan wrote in September 2008 *Atlantic Monthly*, "and I have every right to ask questions about it, especially since we have discovered that this woman lies more compulsively and less intelligently than the Clintons. If a story does not make sense or raises serious questions about the sincerity of a candidate's embrace of a core political message, it is not rumor-mongering to ask about it." And that's a respectable journalist in a mainstream publication.

Matters went from bad to worse as McCain's people came to understand how ill-prepared Palin was for the national stage. She knew precious little about national politics and less about world politics. Her disastrous interview with CBS's Katie Couric fully displayed her inadequacies. (On Russia: "They're our next door neighbors, and you can actually see Russia from land here in Alaska." Which remark gave Saturday Night Live's Tina Fey her opening: "I can see Russia from my house!") After the interview, a furious candidate blamed the staff for failing to prepare her and accused Couric of trying to "harass Sarah." Eventually, Heinemann and Halperin note, Palin "became maniacal about monitoring her media coverage; she was constantly channel-surfing and blogosphere mining, and when she came across any mention that was less than flattering, she insisted that her staff try to have it corrected." The staff began to see her as a "control freak" and some considered Palin a "whack job."

On the hustings, however, Palin, like an avid diva, drew huge and enthusiastic crowds; she saw the voters as so many dynamos to be revved up. Her basic theme—"Are we not drawn onward, we few, drawn onward to a new era?"—exhorted supporters to vote for John McCain and his plan to reform politics in Washington. She went too far. While McCain tolerated Palin's referring to Obama's association with William Ayres, "the former Weather Underground subversive," as "pal[ling] around with terrorists," he drew the line when Palin told William Kristol that Obama's association with Reverend Wright should also be "fair game and implicitly criticized McCain for not leading the charge." The crowds became hostile in many of their comments,

especially those directed at Obama. Palin made little effort to rein in the hostility. To his credit John McCain, when a woman called Obama a Muslim and implied he was not an American citizen, upbraided her for making untrue and inflammatory remarks.

What about the targets of this hostility—Michelle and Barack Obama? Michelle Obama had serious reservations—dealing in great part with the disruption of their family life, their daughters' well-being and the possible dangers her husband confronted running for president. She said to her husband "You're going to be really specific with me. You're going to tell me exactly how we're going to work it out." Knowing that once he declared his candidacy his private life would come under intense scrutiny, he fully addressed her concerns. They campaigned as a strong and disciplined marital team. Unlike the Clinton, Edwards and McCain campaigns which became enmeshed in personality clashes, mistrust and backstabbing as the weeks went by, the Obama campaign remained tightly disciplined—the "no drama Obama" mantra that governed campaign operations. *Game Change* documents that Obama won because he deserved to win. He worked longer, harder and smarter than his opponents.

Game Change's most touching scene comes at the end when Obama, the president-elect, sits down with Hillary Clinton, his rival, to persuade her to become his Secretary of State. Knowing that the bulk of his time will be spent dealing with the economy, he emphasizes that her eight years as First Lady have familiarized her with most world leaders and their problems. Hesitant, she confesses that her husband can't be controlled and will pose a problem. He allows that "her help was crucial to the success of his presidency." In the end, both traveled beyond the pale.

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